



Healing Through Dance

By RANJITA BISWAS

Using a concept called Dance Movement Therapy, Sohini Chakraborty and her team at Kolkata Sanved in Kolkata, West Bengal, have been trying to bring new meaning to the lives of victims of rape, violence, slavery and trafficking, as well as people facing mental challenges or living with diseases such as HIV/AIDS.

The dance therapy is an alternative approach to healing and psychosocial rehabilitation. These sufferers, and also students in some West Bengal schools, are taught how they can use dance as a way of self-expression, thus building the confidence of those

Dancers of the Kolkata Sanved perform at the Max Mueller Bhavan in Kolkata in March 2007.

who may be withdrawn due to inferiority complexes, psychological inhibitions or mental scars.

Through Kolkata Sanved (www.sanved.org), a non-governmental organization which she founded, Chakraborty has been trying to articulate a language for those who are marginalized by hostile circumstances. The word *sanved* roughly translates as sensitivity.

Chakraborty's training as a dancer and her studies in sociology coalesced her approach to dance as something more than a performing art. While doing post-graduate studies, she was regularly performing on stage as a member of Dancer's Guild, a contemporary group that melds Indian traditional dance, folk dance, yoga etc. She was also associated with Kolkata's Rangakarmee theater group. One of its productions was *Beti Aye* (A Girl is Born), focusing on discrimination against the girl child. "It affected my thinking. I was toying with the idea of doing something different with dance but didn't know what I was looking for," Chakraborty recalls.

One reason for this search was her experience with shelter homes that housed girls and women rescued from trafficking.

“One of the special papers for my studies was criminology and so I was familiar with the problem. But I wanted to meet these victims of crime,” says Chakraborty. In 1996, she volunteered to work with Sanlaap (www.sanlaapindia.org), an organization working to rehabilitate rescued girls. While teaching the girls to dance, combining classical and contemporary movements, Chakraborty found she was unable to communicate her aims. The girls followed the movements, but rather mechanically. Chakraborty started experimenting on ways to help them open up. “For example, I told a girl, ‘Suppose you are a tree. How would you express yourself?’” The change in the participant’s body language surprised Chakraborty. She also took the girls to theater performances and other such outings from the shelter home to make them familiar with a world they had had little or no idea about.

At that time Chakraborty knew nothing about Dance Movement Therapy, which had been used in hospitals in Western countries, but in her own way she was getting results with her tentative attempts to draw out the girls and encourage them to articulate their inner feelings. Through her continued studies in modern dance, Chakraborty eventually came across works of American choreographer Martha Graham, Austro-Hungarian dancer Rudolf Laban, and Marian Chace, who first introduced dance as a therapy in U.S. hospitals in the 1940s. She also found the American Dance Therapy Association, established in 1966. She read that dance therapists “found something healing happened in a student’s psyche through improvisation of movements while composing a dance, not from technique.” Chakraborty felt she was on the right track.

Today, Kolkata Sanved, though independent, works with more than 20 other organizations, focusing on issues such as human rights, dance, education and mental health. Partner groups include Sanlaap, All Bengal Women’s Union, Apne Aap Women Worldwide, which works mainly with trafficked children and victims of violence, and Anjali, a mental health organization working within government hospitals. Kolkata Sanved

workshops are also held regularly in rural areas. “We always work with outreach organizations,” Chakraborty says. “They are already working there and know the community. That way, it’s easier for us to begin to build leaders in the community.”

But, it has not been easy to win recognition. “People thought it was just another form of dancing. We make it a point to say our aim is not to make just pretty dancers,” says Chakraborty. She admits, though, that people started looking at her work as more than just a form of contemporary dance after 2003, when she got the Ashoka Fellowship for innovative use of dance from the Virginia-based non-profit society that for 25 years has recognized emerging leaders. “Judge the people by their skill, not what they are or have been,” Chakraborty cautions.

For example, rape victims and women rescued from prostitution suffer tremendously from a sense of shame. Through Dance

Movement Therapy, they are encouraged to emerge out of the feeling that “my body is impure” and believe that “I am creating my own body through my own expression.”

Chakraborty feels proud that Kolkata Sanved’s trainers have emerged from disadvantaged circumstances themselves and are today confident enough to run workshops on their own in well-known schools in the city. She also emphasizes that rehabilitation programs for women should look beyond the traditional skills, tailoring, handicrafts etc. “Why not teaching, why not information technology?” Besides, it is a tremendous boost to the girls to be recognized as professionals in their own right.

For teaching tools, Kolkata Sanved explores materials from all sources. Not waiting for stretchy dance materials to be available from abroad, the trainers hunt in sports shops and pick up things like fitness rolling balls and power band sets to make hands flexible.

The Kolkata organization is associated with the American Dance Therapy Association and the Vanderbilt University Dance Program in Tennessee, among others. At the association’s annual convention in New Orleans, Louisiana in 2004, Kolkata Sanved was the first organization representing India to participate with a presentation: “Surviving through Creation.” Since then, papers such as “Advocacy through Dance” (Tennessee, 2005) and “Using Indian Dance and Movement for Therapy” (California, 2006) have established the group’s credentials.

“The American Dance Therapy Association is a great support,” Chakraborty says, “Whenever I need help they come forward.”



Dancers display the Dance Movement Therapy concept. The strings signify a coordination of the body and mind.

Working with so many like-minded people has been a great learning process. Participants have learned that similar work has been going on in cities and at the grassroots level in India, Nepal and Bangladesh.

Chakraborty and the Kolkata Sanved team members are now working to prepare a curriculum on their techniques called *sampurnata* (fulfillment). Her dream is to establish a full-fledged institute drawing on all these experiences and learning

processes to help unspoken words find an articulated voice through body language. The process is already on. It has reached more than 2,000 children and young people from urban and rural areas through workshops, regular training classes and replication programs. Now 20 people have been selected from partner organizations to become full-fledged trainers to carry on and develop the theory and practice.

“I believe it’s a respecting process we go through when we use dance as a therapy,” says Chakraborty. “We give respect to each other as human beings, without discrimination of any kind.”



Ranjita Biswas is a Kolkata-based freelance journalist who also translates literature and writes fiction.

Please share your views on this article. Write to editorspan@state.gov